

BENHAM

Fastest in the Fleet

BY CHARLES H. BOGART

Fighting hard in some of the Pacific's deadliest battles, this plucky destroyer would succumb to the overwhelming force of the Tokyo Express

The 1930s saw the United States gripped in the Great Depression. One of the means by which Congress sought to pump money back into the economy was by increased naval construction. In this vein, Congress on 27 March 1934 passed into law a major naval construction bill. Among the 57 destroyers authorized by this bill was the USS *Benham* (DD-397), which would become known to her crew as "Dead Ready." The *Benham*, while not lead ship of the 15 near sister ships (DD-394-408), gave her name to the class. These 15 destroyers varied greatly in length, beam, armament, engines, boilers, and fuel supply but did present the same general appearance. These variances between ships were due to assigning construction of the ships to eight different shipyards.

Particulars of *Benham* were length 341-ft 2-in, beam 35-ft 6-in, draft 10-ft 9-in, displacement 1725-tons, shaft horsepower 50,000, screws two, armament four 5-in/38-cal, four .50-cal machine guns, 16

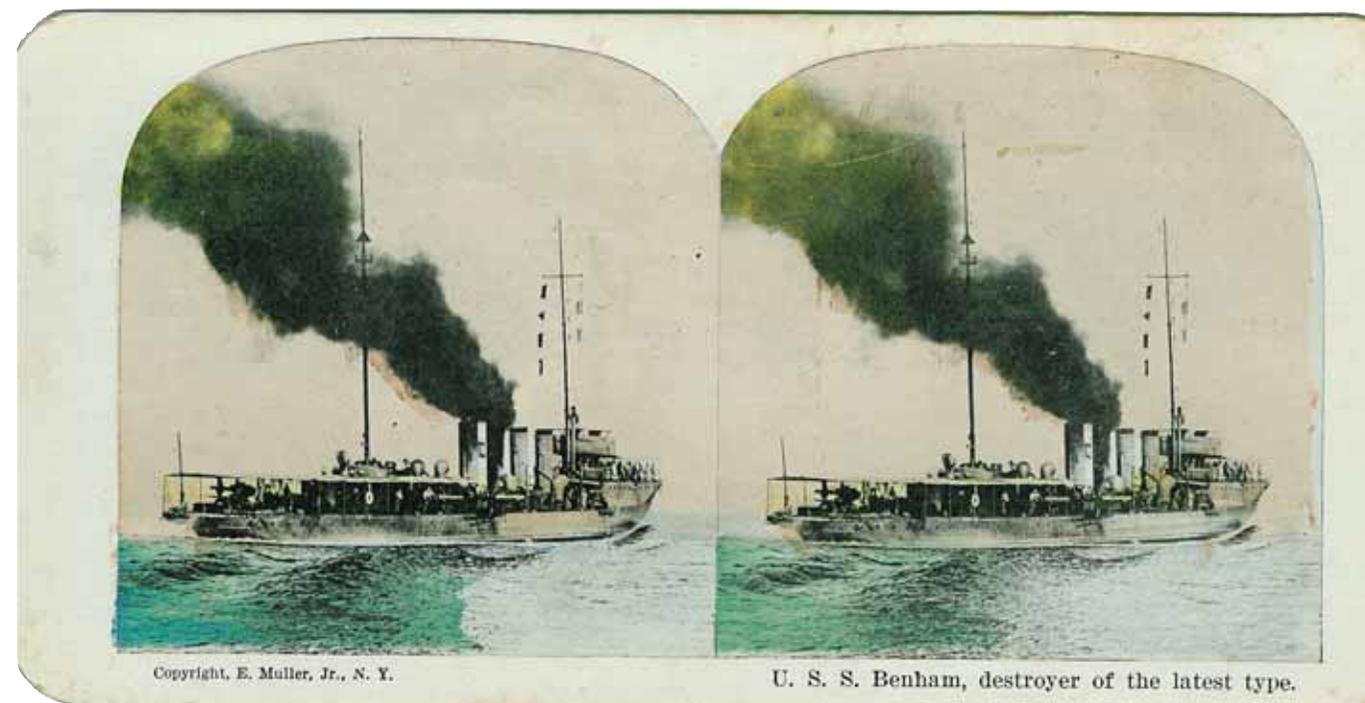
21-in torpedoes, designed speed 38.5-kts, crew nine officers and 175 enlisted men.

Benham was laid down on 1 September 1936 by Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Kearney, New Jersey. Named for R/Adm. Andrew E. Benham (1832-1905), she was the second ship to bear the name. The first *Benham* was DD-49, which served from 1914-1935. The second *Benham* was launched by Mrs. Albert I. Dorr, a grandniece of the Admiral. The *Benham* was commissioned into the US Navy on 2 February 1939 as the fastest ship in the Navy. While designed for 38.5-kts she had recorded during her builder trials a speed of 41.8-kts.

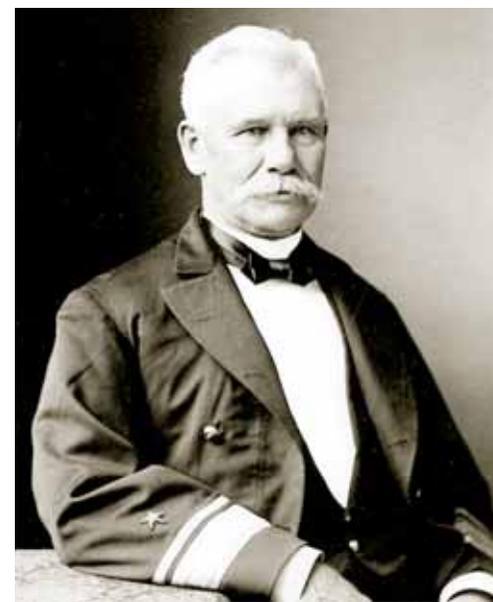
Scheduled for a shakedown cruise to European waters, *Benham* instead sailed for the Gulf of Mexico due to the unstable conditions in Europe. Calls were made along the Gulf Coast and in Cuba. With the outbreak of war in Europe on 1 September 1939, *Benham* was ordered to Newport, Rhode Island, to form

a destroyer division (DESDIV) with *Ellet*, *Lang*, *Davis*, and *Jouett* as part of the neutrality patrol off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland.

Benham's only excitement during her patrol off Newfoundland was being dispatched to escort the passenger ship *Iroquois* to the US from Europe. This order was a result of the sinking of the passenger ship *Athenia* by *U-30* on 3 September 1939, an act disclaimed by Germany and in turn blamed on England by Germany. In the war of propaganda that followed, Germany claimed that England was preparing to sink the *Iroquois* as she sailed from Europe for the US carrying Americans evacuated from the war zone. England in turn claimed that Germany was going to sink the *Iroquois* and blame it on England. To insure that none of the countercharges came true, *Benham* was ordered to act as escort for *Iroquois*. The voyage however proceeded without incident and *Iroquois* safely discharged her passengers in New York.



Stereo slide of of the first USS *Benham*, DD-49, which was launched on 22 March 1913.



The destroyer was named after Andrew Ellicott Kennedy Benham (10 April 1832/11 August 1905).

Luckily for *Benham*, as winter descended on Newfoundland, she and the other ships of the division were ordered south to the Gulf of Mexico in December 1939. During her deployment in the Gulf, *Benham* twice came into contact with German vessels trying to run the blockade back to Germany. The blockade runners were the *Aruacas* and *Columbus*. Following instructions, *Benham* upon sighting the German ships sent off in the clear radio messages reporting the

position and course of the ships. Acting upon these reports, the Royal Navy was able to intercept both ships.

In April 1940, *Benham* and the rest of the division were ordered to the Pacific Ocean. The division arrived at their new home port Pearl Harbor on 14 April 1940. Upon arrival, *Benham* was detached to proceed to San Diego, California, to take part in a Marine Corps landing exercise on San Clemente Island. High point of the exercise was a close in-shore bombardment as the Marines hit the beach. This was the first test of the use of naval gunfire for close support during an assault landing.

Once the Marines were ashore, *Benham* sailed for San Diego leaving the Marines behind to continue the exercise on San Clemente. Before *Benham* reached San Diego, she was ordered back to San Clemente to re-embark the Marines and return them to San Diego at the highest possible speed. This marked the first time since her builder's trials that *Benham* was not restricted to the peacetime speed.

Before sailing again for Pearl, *Benham* entered the San Diego Navy Yard. Here splinter shields

were installed around her guns, a degaussing cable was incorporated into her hull, the ASW listening gear was upgraded, and all flammable and splinterable gear not needed for fighting was stripped.

Arriving at Pearl in June, *Benham* was immediately thrown into a frantic schedule of training covering all types of operations, with special attention being given to underway refueling and acting as plane guard to the carriers *Saratoga* and *Enterprise*. Most of these operations were conducted with the *Enterprise*. The exercise would commence with the *Enterprise* and her accompanying battleships — *Arizona*, *Oklahoma*, and *Nevada* and screening destroyers sortieing to sea. Once at sea, however, the battleships, due to their slow speed, would be detached to operate by themselves while *Enterprise* and her screen of destroyers would steam over the horizon to conduct fleet exercises.

When not operating with the carriers, *Benham* was assigned to the Inshore Patrol off Hawaii. While assigned to this patrol in September 1941 she made sonar contact with what was evaluated as a submarine operating in the 10-mile restricted area off of the entrance to Pearl. Permission was requested to attack

USS *Benham* (DD-397) shortly after commissioning.

